



CAMBRIDGE HISTORICAL COMMISSION

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May 28, 2010

To: Members of the Historical Commission

From: Charles Sullivan

Re: Case L-94: 9 Ash Street, Philip Johnson House Landmark Designation Study

The Philip Johnson house is one of a handful of significant early modern houses constructed in Cambridge just before World War II. Johnson had been instrumental in bringing the International Style to American attention through a book and an exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, where he was director of the Department of Architecture. He organized visits to the United States for Mies van der Rohe and Le Corbusier, and commissioned Mies in 1939 to design his New York City apartment. The following year, at age 34, Johnson left to study architecture at Harvard. At first, he rented a small house at 995 Memorial Drive, but architecture students at that time were required to have three months of practical construction experience and Johnson satisfied the prerequisite by designing a house for himself at 9 Ash Street, for which he received a building permit in September 1941. According to one source, Johnson based his design on what he called Mies's "earth-hugging court-houses," designed in 1931-38 with glassed living spaces facing a walled courtyard, only one of which was ever built (Jacobus, 25).

The Johnson house has a simple rectangular plan that almost entirely fills the 4,800 square foot lot on the corner of Ash and Acacia streets. All that is visible from the street is the striated vertical texture of a continuous 9-foot high wall of stressed-skin plywood panels that form both the walls of the courtyard and the exterior walls of the house. Behind the plywood enclosure, one long glass wall faces onto the secluded courtyard, providing a perfect integration of interior and exterior space. Three laminated wood columns support the

flat roof. This system allowed four sheets of plate glass to make up the nearly continuous wall facing the forecourt, and offered great freedom in the arrangement of partitions and interior rooms. All of the materials, including wall and roof panels, window frames, and the installation of insulation within the panels, were prefabricated by the Horsley Company, of New York. Delivered to the site, they were bolted and glued together by local contractors to make what the *Cambridge Chronicle-Sun* described as “a four-room house, the like of which Cambridge has never seen before” (April 23, 1942).



Philip Johnson house, 9 Ash Street. Google Street View photo.

The Johnson house was designed solely to meet the needs of its bachelor architect. The interior was quite formal, and was furnished with Miesian pieces as precisely arranged as in a museum gallery. Although the Horsley Company developed a line of moderately-priced prefabricated homes after the war, the architectural program of Johnson’s house was limited to providing modest living quarters and privacy on a city street for a single individual. The program neglected the impact of the house on the streetscape. The wall turned out to exceed the legal height by 2 feet, and an article in *The Architects Journal* criticized Johnson’s disregard for “the traditional American neighbourhood pattern” (March 16, 1944).

Johnson sold the house after the War, and it remained in single-family ownership until it was purchased by Prof. Lawrence Tribe in the 1980s. Prof. Tribe used the house as a study for many years, but placed it on the market in 2008. Harvard University’s Graduate School of Design agreed to purchase the property and restore it as a residence for visiting faculty, but their offer was contingent on obtaining an institutional use variance from the

Board of Zoning Appeal. The BZA denied their application, and the house will now go back on the market.

The unique design of the Johnson house almost defeats the purpose of designation as a landmark under the Cambridge ordinance or under Ch. 40C of the General Laws because those measures only protect aspects of a property that are visible from a public way. Harvard had agreed to place the courtyard under the National Register protocol, allowing staff review of alterations behind the wall (but not inside the house itself). Designation of the exterior of the house as landmark is the only measure now available to protect this nationally significant property, and the staff strongly recommends that the Commission initiate this landmark designation study.